

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 287 198

EA 019 684

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TITLE Schools Must Teach Kids How To Cope.  
INSTITUTION National School Boards Association, Alexandria, VA.  
Educational Policies Service.  
PUB DATE Oct 87  
NOTE 4p.  
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use  
(055)  
JOURNAL CIT Updating School Board Policies; v18 n9 p1-3 Oct  
1987  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Communication Skills; Conflict Resolution; \*Coping;  
Curriculum Development; Daily Living Skills; Decision  
Making; Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary  
Education; Family Problems; \*Interpersonal  
Relationship; Prevention; \*Quality of Life; \*School  
Responsibility; \*Self Concept; Social Problems;  
\*Student Needs; Student School Relationship

## ABSTRACT

Students need opportunities for developing a strong self-image and for learning how to cope with life's problems safely and effectively. Programs should be provided that offer young people the opportunity to develop (1) a strong and secure sense of self-worth; (2) more effective communication skills; (3) the ability to cope with disappointment, rejection, and loss; (4) an inherent understanding that violence is never acceptable behavior; and (5) clearer and more realistic expectations about their roles in all relationships including marriage, parenting, family life, and career. The most successful programs are those that are a mandated part of the basic educational process, comprehensive, year-long, and taught by the best teachers. One program, "The Dynamics of Relationships," is a primary prevention curriculum that is taught by teachers and guidance counselors; it was piloted in 1985 in four Washington, D.C. high schools as a full-year, five-day-a-week, one-credit elective. Another 18-week program, "Skills for Adolescence," is designed to build self-esteem in youngsters so they can deal better with the pressures of growing up in a stressful and complex society. Instructions for obtaining information about these programs are provided. (MLF)

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# Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 18/Number 9/October 1987

A component of the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association provided to NSBA Direct Affiliates and EPS subscribers

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## Schools must teach kids how to cope

by Patricia Kramer

Most people define "at-risk" students as those who are likely to drop out of school. But opting out of school is only a first step. At-risk students are at risk of dropping out of society—literally and figuratively.

### Scope of problem

A recent survey found that "90 percent of high school students in the United States feel that their lives are *useless*." And a 1985 Education Commission of the States (ECS) report stated, "... at least 15 percent of Americans between the ages of 16 and 19 are unlikely to become productive adults because they are 'disconnected' from society as a result of drug abuse, delinquency, pregnancy, unemployment, and dropping out of school."

School board members may be tired of hearing statistics about the social ills plaguing young people today. But they bear repeating. Too few school systems are responding to the children's cries.

### Whose responsibility?

When teenagers feel that their lives are "useless," is any one institution or group to blame?

Should parents be blamed—for getting divorced or being too busy; churches—for not being able to hold young people's spiritual interest; the judicial system—because it lets too many young people go unpunished when charged with a crime; government—for laws that are too lax and programs that are uncoordinated and inadequate; the

*Patricia Kramer, a Maryland-based consultant, has developed a curriculum that teaches young people how to cope with social and emotional conflicts.*

media—for its disregard of young viewers and its promotion of sex and violence; rock videos—for their exploitation of young women and promotion of sex?

Perhaps our educational system should be blamed for saying, "Our role is to teach students to read and write—the *basics*. Leave the job of developing the social side of young people to the family and church."

Few would disagree that teaching values, morals and appropriate behavior is a parental responsibility. Most parents attempt to do that. In a society that has such rigorous requirements for people who want to become doctors, lawyers, accountants, teachers—and plumbers and electricians, however, becoming a parent requires no similar prerequisites. Instead, people are expected to reach adulthood and take on the role of partner in all types of relationships (friendships, marriage, and business) and parent without any specific preparation.

### Who will educate?

An article in a 1984 issue of *Family Life Educator* stated, "... Soviet leaders are concerned about the nation's skyrocketing divorce rate, especially among couples in their teens and twenties. So *compulsory* classes in 'hygienic and sexual education and the ethics and psychology of family life' are being inaugurated in all senior high schools."

The key to this message is that the Soviets recognized the value of taking a *preventive* approach. Most European schools have taken that same approach by implementing sex education as a part of the daily curriculum.

Within the United States, however,

where poll after poll shows that approximately 85 percent of parents want their children to participate in sex education classes, the majority of schools do not offer classes in sex education, family life, or interpersonal relationships. Those that do often squeeze them in between other "basics."

The most frequently heard excuses from school administrators about why they do not offer these courses are:

- "We have no room or time. We have rigid requirements that just don't allow for these elective courses."
- "It is not our responsibility. It is for parents or even churches to do."
- "Academic learning is the primary mission of schools. We cannot be responsible for the total child."

Yet, Ernest Boyer, President of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, wrote in the forward to *Student Service: The New Carnegie Unit*, "Students do not see formal education as having a consequential relationship to who they are, or even in a fundamental way, what they might become."

And, according to *High School and Beyond*, when seniors were asked to rate various life goals as "very important," 82 percent rated "finding the right person to marry and having a happy family life" and 81 percent rated "having strong friendships" as very important.

Young people are virtually shouting that they want help in living the lives with which they are struggling now—and are as deeply afraid of failing in the future. When asked, they will tell you how much they want help and how much they would like to have classes in

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which they can discuss their lives, fears, hopes, and dreams.

Still, schools resist offering programs that would address these concerns. Instead, short-term "crisis intervention" programs on such topics as substance abuse, suicide, AIDS, teen pregnancy, and sexual abuse proliferate. These programs either are incorporated into other courses or are offered for a few days or weeks with the unrealistic hope that these mini-courses will not only change attitudes, but also influence behaviors.

That response is inadequate. Schools must do more. Schools must recognize that it is not enough to make sure that students can read and write. Students who are struggling with rejection, loss, failure, or disappointment cannot be expected to open their minds to the educational "basics" that schools teach. And, where else but in school is there the opportunity to reach large masses of young people quickly and comprehensively?

### Need recognized

There is evidence to support schools getting involved.

As described in "Family Problems Impact on Classroom" (*Learning* 86), a survey of teachers revealed "that teachers believe that family problems are having an impact on students in their classrooms . . ." Family problems are resulting in aggressive-ness, declining grades, moodiness, withdrawal, nervousness, and physical complaints among children.

The *Miami Herald* reported a few years ago that the preliminary results of a study of more than 4,000 seven-year-olds showed declines of more than 13 percent in IQ test performance among children who came from homes where the parents were unemployed, separated, or suffering from some other stressful situation. Dr. Bernard Brown, a

psychologist with the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, said in the article, "Childhood stress can cause a striking decline in a child's performance on IQ tests." Explained Brown, "In addition to its well known effects on the body, we believe that stress also has an effect on intelligence. . . . chronic stress, like coming from an unhappy home situation, can apparently have a major impact on a child's mental abilities."

### What next?

School board members and administrators must adjust their thinking about education so that basic education and teaching social skills become synonymous. The only real hope for these young people's futures lies in attempts to *prevent* some of the tragic social ills that are devastating them and their families. Approaches that treat more than symptoms must be used. If the approach is not changed, still higher incidence of suicides, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, drop outs, violence, and family abuse will result.

Many school systems are making strides in this area, and many others are making attempts. What they all have in common is their goal. They want to help kids feel so good about themselves that they no longer feel the need to self-destruct.

### Establish objectives

Students need opportunities for developing a strong self-image and to learn how to cope with life's problems safely and effectively. These opportunities can be provided through programs that are designed to offer young people an arena in which to talk openly about sensitive and personal issues with which so many are struggling during their teen years.

The primary objectives for such programs should be to develop:

- a strong and secure sense of self-worth that will help teens say no to sex, drugs, alcohol, and other harmful or self-destructive behaviors;
- more effective communication skills that will help teens interact better with others and also to handle anger and conflict constructively and safely;
- the ability to cope with disappointment, rejection, and loss;
- an inherent understanding that violence is never acceptable behavior;
- clearer and more realistic expectations about their roles in all relationships, including marriage, parenting, family life, and career.

These objectives are as necessary in a rural setting as they are in a wealthy suburban community or in an inner-city ghetto. Although there certainly are differences among youth that stem from their environment and culture, low self-image, peer pressure, boredom, and lack of family unit or support are universal experiences for young people. The issues cross all barriers, and the methods for helping young people to achieve these objectives need not vary from community to community.

### Promising approaches

No matter what approach is used (*see box*), underlying it must be a caring community of schools and parents. Although programs can be implemented outside the schools, such as in recreation centers or religious institutions, schools are the only institutions that provide the structure, setting, and discipline to reach the numbers of young people needing help.

The most successful programs are those that are a mandated part of the basic educational process—K-12, comprehensive, year-long, and taught by the best teachers. They deal with all the issues kids are struggling with and want to deal with while also addressing the primary objectives stated above.

If the optimum is not possible, however, there are some effective alternatives.

- Integrate the goals into existing courses. A math or English teacher can concentrate on communication skills, for example. A science teacher can teach conflict resolution. Every teacher can work on

*Updating School Board Policies* is published eleven times annually and provided to every board member and the policy administrator of school districts that participate in the National School Boards Association's Direct Affiliate Program or subscribe to NSBA's Educational Policies Service. EPS Staff: Dale Gaddy, director, education and management services department; Brenda Z. Greene, editor; Eve Shepard, clearinghouse manager.

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building self-esteem in their students.

- Require school counselors to be more involved in group activities with students through which they help young people develop social skills and build self-esteem.
- Encourage parent programs in which parents and children work together in groups. These groups can be led by school psychologists, counselors, teachers, or outside community and agency people; the only prerequisite is that they be trained to do the job first.
- Offer programs before or after school, again with appropriately trained people conducting them.
- Facilitate peer counseling programs by training students as leaders and providing "rap session" rooms in which students can freely drop in to find an understanding and supportive friend.
- Use available opportunities where groups of students are assembled, such as long bus rides, for conducting mini-programs.

Clearly, each school system—or school—can be creative and design a program that fits its special needs.

### Prepare teachers

The key element, no matter where or how such programs are established, is training. In fact, training should be provided even if there is no structured program. All teachers can benefit from learning how to:

- help students learn decision-making skills without making decisions for them;
- help students develop coping skills that enable them to handle disappointment, rejection, and loss;
- listen to, talk with, be a friend, and provide a shoulder to their students;
- teach communication skills that help students deal safely with anger and conflict;
- help students build and maintain a strong sense of pride and self-esteem;
- be sensitive to behavior changes in young people that signal suicide plans, abuse, or an inability to cope with something in their lives.

Schools of education do not require this kind of training of their graduates; rarely do they even *offer* this kind of

### Courses in coping skills

Several successful programs that address young people's needs to develop self-esteem and learn to cope with life's problems have been developed. One such program, "The Dynamics of Relationships," is a primary prevention curriculum that was piloted in 1985 in four Washington, D.C., high schools as a full-year, five-day a week, one-credit elective. Last year, 16 classes in 12 schools, including junior high schools, were offered; this year, elementary schools also will be offering the course.

The course is taught by teachers of various disciplines and some guidance counselors. Dramatic results were seen.

Teachers reported positive outcomes, particularly in the area of increased self-esteem. Teachers also noted a high rate of attendance and participation by students, not common behaviors in other classes. And one social studies teacher noted with surprise that no books had been lost in the Dynamics of Relationships class, though this was not the case in any of his government classes.

Although teachers originally were concerned that the course textbook would be too difficult for many of their students, some students reported that the text was their "Bible." It helped them solve day-to-day problems while also helping them become more aware of their own feelings, as well as the feelings of others. When a reading class was turned into a "Dynamics" class, the youngsters found a way to read the text. It was something to read that interested them, and they were determined to find a way to read it.

The major strengths of the "Dynamics" course, and others like it, are:

- It is offered as an elective five days a week for the entire school year; it is not a "quick fix" approach.
- Self-esteem is the primary theme throughout the year.
- Students use a textbook that speaks to them—not at them, and that gives them guidelines and suggestions—not rules and regulations.
- At no time are the students preached at, lectured to, judged, or deemed wrong because they offer their own opinion; all are listened to and supported in a caring, nonjudgmental way.
- Students are helped to make decisions by being taught decision-making skills and conflict resolution. They are helped to make mature and wise decisions by examining the consequences of their behavior. They are taught why and how to develop a strong sense of responsibility.
- The classroom structure and atmosphere quickly becomes loving and supportive.
- Teachers are selected because of certain personal qualities that they possess and not because of their specific discipline; home economics, social studies, health, art, special education, and library teachers currently teach the course.
- Teacher training is a priority; a minimum of 45 hours of preparation is required.

For information on "The Dynamics of Relationships," contact Patricia Kramer, Equal Partners, 11348 Connecticut Avenue, Kensington, Md. 20895 (301/933-1489).

An 18-week program, "Skills for Adolescence," also is designed to build self-esteem in youngsters so they can deal better with the pressures of growing up in a stressful and complex society. It involves several components, including class discussions, community projects, and parent seminars.

Information on "Skills for Adolescence" is available from: Quest National Center, 6655 Sharon Woods Boulevard, Columbus, Ohio 43229 (614/882-6400).

training. Schools boards, however, can set standards for the teachers they hire that include preparation in these special areas.

### Not a panacea

By no means are these programs the panacea or "cure all" for the world's social ills. Nevertheless, school boards must make "preventing" the myriad of

social ills that are having a detrimental effect on individuals, classroom environment, and society at large a priority.

Learning self-respect, how to get along with others, and how to cope with life's problems must become a part of every youth's "basic" education. Learning how to read and write just is not enough when youngsters cannot also cope with their lives or handle the adult roles that they will soon face. ■